



**PERFIL SOCIOECONÔMICO DE TUTORES DE PET E FATORES
MOTIVADORES NA COMPRA DE PET FOOD**

**SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF PET GUARDIANS AND MOTIVATING
FACTORS IN THE PURCHASE OF PET FOOD**

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RESUMO

O perfil socioeconômico dos responsáveis foi definido a partir de questionários anônimos elaborados por meio do App Survey, com perguntas sobre condições socioeconômicas, animais e alimentação. Verificou-se que 78% dos responsáveis não têm filhos e 80% deles são mulheres com idade entre 20 e 30 anos, com remuneração mensal de até cinco salários. Identificamos que os fatores decisivos na compra de alimentos são: preferência ou aceitabilidade do animal (29%); preço (19%); ingredientes (11%); qualidade nutricional (17%). Tais resultados evidenciam a preocupação dos responsáveis com a qualidade dos alimentos e os gastos com dietas nutricionalmente adequadas, principalmente aquelas bem aceitas pelos animais de estimação. Esta pesquisa também mostrou que 66% dos entrevistados dão comida natural aos seus animais de estimação e 55% deles relataram satisfação dos animais de estimação com a comida natural. Esses achados indicam uma predisposição dos tutores dos animais de estimação em comprar alimentos naturais, com boa aceitação pelos animais e a preços acessíveis. O perfil socioeconômico dos tutores de cães e gatos em Teresina é caracterizado por mulheres jovens de classe média, conscientes da importância da nutrição e que buscam produtos acessíveis para fins de manutenção da saúde e bem-estar dos animais de estimação.

Palavras-chave: Agronegócio, bem-estar animal, animais de companhia, pet food

ABSTRACT

The socioeconomic profile of those responsible was defined based on anonymous questionnaires prepared through the App Survey, with questions about socioeconomic conditions, animals and food. It was found that 78% of those responsible do not have children and 80% of them are women aged between 20 and 30, with a monthly salary of up to five salaries. We identified that the decisive factors when purchasing food are: preference or acceptability of the animal (29%); price (19%); ingredients (11%); nutritional quality (17%). Such results highlight the concern of those responsible for the quality of food and the expenditure on nutritionally adequate diets, especially

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those well accepted by pets. This survey also showed that 66% of respondents feed natural food to their pets and 55% of them reported pet satisfaction with natural food. These findings indicate a predisposition of pet owners to buy natural foods, which are well accepted by animals and at affordable prices. The socioeconomic profile of dog and cat owners in Teresina is characterized by young, middle-class women, aware of the importance of nutrition and who seek affordable products to maintain the health and well-being of their pets.

Keywords: Agribusiness, animal welfare, companion animals, pet food

1 Introduction

Animal presence in family environments increases progressively with the increase in the number of homes in Brazil. This can represent the importance of these animals in the lives of humans and in modern urban society, largely due to the benefits of human-animal interactions (MOURA, 2013; SILVA et al., 2021).

Interaction with pets has been proven to reduce cases of depression, stress, and anxiety. In addition, such interaction improves mood, increases the stimulus to carry out healthy activities, promotes greater socialization for the elderly and people with physical and mental disabilities, and improves the learning and socialization of children.

The benefits of interaction with pets were evidenced during the recent COVID-19 pandemic that showed clearly that environment, health and human welfare are interdependent, so that the damage of one of these factors impacts the others. Thus, in a holistic view, human well-being is correlated with the interconnections between animals, plants, and shared environment (JALONGO, 2021; HEDIGER and BEETZ, 2021; MORGAN and others, 2020).

It is estimated that there are about 470 million dogs and 370 million cats kept as pets worldwide. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), there are more than 132 million companion animals in Brazil. Pets have become an option for company, because of the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic associated with declining birth rate, increasing number of people living alone, and families having children later in life.

The emotional attachment between guardians and their companion animals makes pets a priority in budget expenditures. This situation shows that change in society' lifestyle has a direct impact on these results, which is why the pet market has expanded even during the crisis.

People treating pets as family members drive market growth in volume and more rapidly in revenue as consumers choose higher-cost products and invest more in the animal's health and well-being.

In this context, Rocha (ROCHA, 2015) evaluated the opinions of people of different ages living in a house and reported that young adults (aged 18 to 25) see domestic animals as siblings, whereas childless couples composed of people aged over 25 years treat their pets like children.

The growing trend of pet humanization has strongly driven marketing actions, generating conflicting information on the internet about the best foods for animals (SCHLEICHER et al.,

2019). Such condition makes it increasingly difficult for owners to take objective pet food purchase decisions.

According to the National Confederation of Stores Leaders, the most important items to provide pets with are healthy food (79.2%), health care (78.8%), and comfortable sleep (57.6%). These results demonstrate the importance of choosing a good pet food.

In recent years, pet nutrition has become a large job market for animal nutritionists, such as Zootechnicians, due to its great expansion and increasing demands of guardians for nutritional quality of their animals' diets.

One of the roles of Animal Science professionals is the nutritional guidance for dogs and cats. For this, essential nutrients are included in balanced alternative diets, such as vegetarian, organic, and homemade, which can be prepared by the guardians, provided they have been previously instructed.

In general, there are still many myths and misinformation about pet breeding, especially in the pandemic world. In view of the effective increase in invested capital for pet care, industry and commerce need information about the factors that motivate the pet food acquisition and adoption of natural diet. Such information will be useful to draw consumer profiles and mobilize efforts to meet the aspirations and demands of this increasingly prosperous market in the Brazilian agribusiness.

2 Material and methods

The research was carried out in the city of Teresina, Piauí (latitude 05°05'20 S, longitude 42°48'07 W at an altitude of 72 m a.s.l.), near the border with the Maranhão state. A questionnaire was prepared using the Survey App and shared over social media in all regions of the city.

The present study was approved by the Ethics Committee on Research with Human Beings of the State University of Piauí (UESPI), report No. 4.211.451 of August 13, 2020. The survey contained questions that were used to trace the socioeconomic profile of the guardians, as well as zootechnical information on how they raise their animals. The online response collection was used in order to ensure safety for researchers and respondents due to the pandemic situation.

Questions on the following subjects were used to trace the socioeconomic profile of the guardians: socioeconomic conditions; age; gender; city and state where they live; type of place where they buy pet food; the decisive factors for choosing the ration; whether the guardian is satisfied with the food he or she offers to pets; whether the guardian knows or has used natural pet food.

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The following information about pets was also collected: age; breeds; frequency of feeding; level of satisfaction of the animal with the food; acceptance of natural food by pets.

The survey link was available from November to December 2020. During this period, guardians from different parts of the city of Teresina shared the link on social media and emails, which resulted in 103 responses collected.

After the analyses, the responses were entered into Excel spreadsheets for data extraction and construction of graphs for data interpretation.

3 Results and discussion

The socioeconomic profile of pet guardians was traced based on questions such as age, gender, and income. After quantitative analysis of the answers, it was observed that the age of respondents ranged from 20 to 30 years, 78% of them were childless people, and 80% are females (Figures 1A and 1B).

Figure 1- Socioeconomic distribution of pet guardians in Teresina, PI, Brazil.



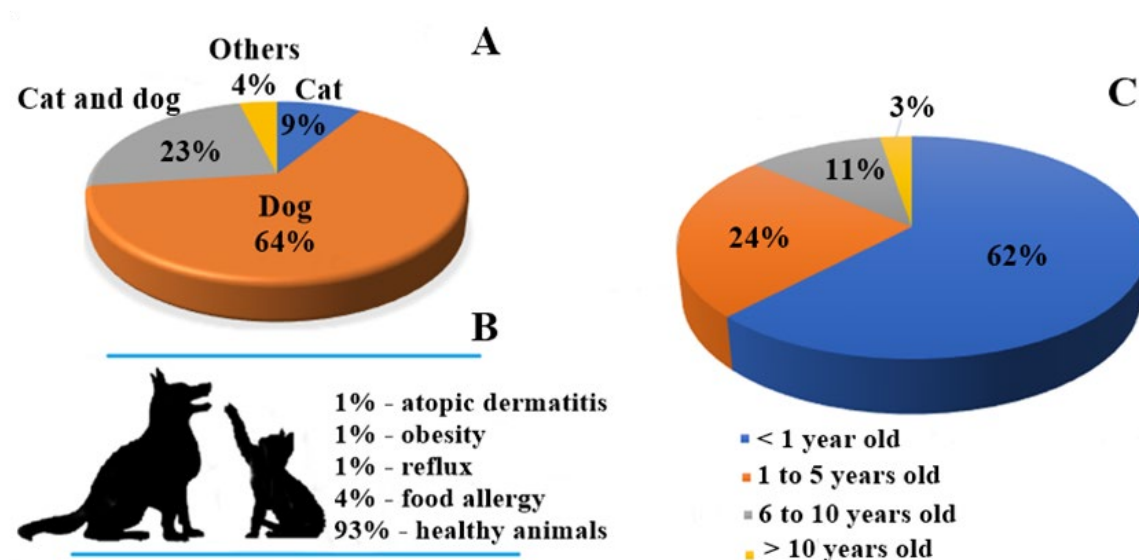
Our results showed that the monthly income of men and women ranged from 1 to 5

minimum wages, which corresponded to a range from R\$ 1,100 to R\$ 5,500 per month (currency of Brazil). According to Carter and Taylor (CARTER & TAYLOR, 2017), responsible pet guardianship can be costly and is often out of reach for low-income people. Therefore, those from higher socioeconomic groups are more likely to have companion animals and expend more resources on pet care.

Based on the responses obtained in the current study, 64% of the pet guardians who live in the city of Teresina – PI raise only dogs, whereas 9% of them raise only cats, 23% raise dogs and cats, and only 4% raise other pets.

With regard to the health of pets raised in Teresina, we observed that 93% of them are healthy, 4% have food allergies and 3% manifest diseases such as obesity, atopic dermatitis, and reflux (Figures 2A, 2B, and 2C).

Figure 2 - Most raised species (A), sanitary status of pets (B), and age groups of pets (C).



Most of the households own dogs or cats, especially due to the higher sociability of these pets. This makes these companion animals qualitatively different from pets such as reptiles and birds, particularly when there is expectation to provide emotional support and companionship, which has become more evident during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (JALONGO, 2021).

Regarding the age of pets, 62% of them were until 1 year old, 24% were between 1 and 5 years old, and 11% aged 6 to 10 years old. These findings corroborate the current scenario experienced by the population, that is, restriction and social isolation, where companion animals have been an important source of emotional support.

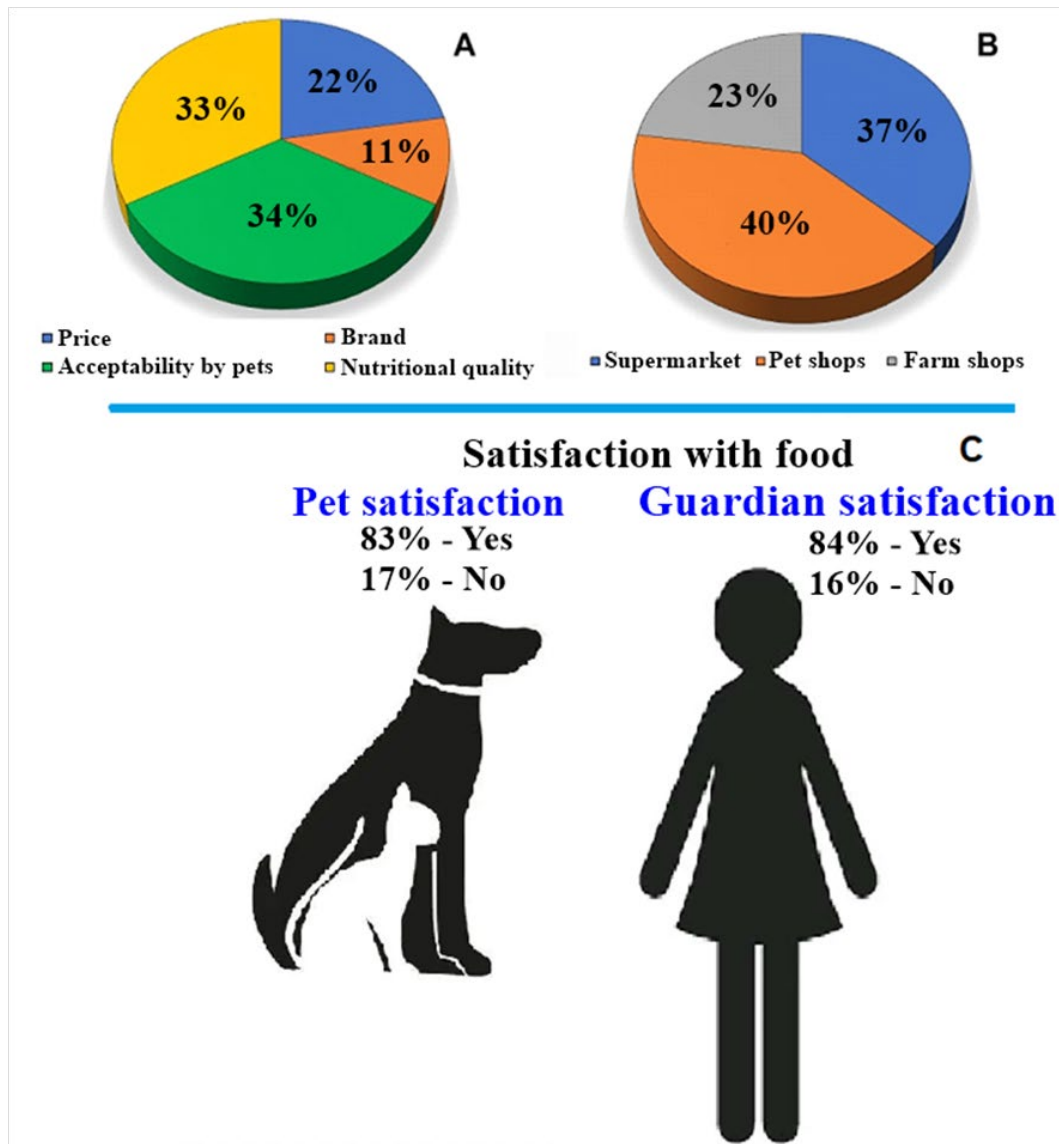
During the COVID-19 pandemic, the link between the well-being of animals and humans became undeniable (DECARO et al., 2020). In this context, our findings show the significant participation of pets under 1 year old.

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Hawkins and Brodie (HAWKINS & BRODIE, 2020) collected data at three time-points during COVID-19 lockdown and described a scenario similar to that reported in the current study. In such scenario, the social isolation motivated people to seek companionship from animals to reduce stress and insecurity caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, the guardians see a beneficial link between company animals and reduction of anxiety and negative emotions.

The following factors were the most frequently mentioned by respondents as decisive when choosing food for their pets: 34% mentioned the acceptability by the animal; for 18% the price is the most important factor; 34% purchase according to nutritional quality information; 11% prioritize brand (Figure 3A). According to 40% of the respondents, pet shops are the favorite places to buy pet food, whereas 37% chose supermarkets and 23% usually go to farm houses to buy food for their pets (Figure 3B).

Figure 3 - Distribution of factors influencing pet food purchase (A), main places to buy pet food (B), and satisfaction of pets and guardians with food (C).



Our findings show that the acceptability by animals is the most decisive factor when buying pet food. We observed that 83% of the animals were satisfied with food, which is why 84% of the guardians kept providing the same diet to their pets (Figure 3C).

The statement above can be confirmed analyzing the human-animal proximity during the research period, in which the social isolation imposed to contain the COVID-19 increased the contact of pets with their guardians and changed their domestic routine. These changes include, for example, daily pet feeding frequency: 43% of the respondents fed their pets twice a day; 32% fed three or more times a day; 15% of the guardians left food available throughout the day; 11% of the respondents fed their pets only once a day.

The bond between pets and guardians has been strengthened by the pandemic and confinement. Therefore, the guardians had the opportunity to closely observe the behavior of their dogs and cats.

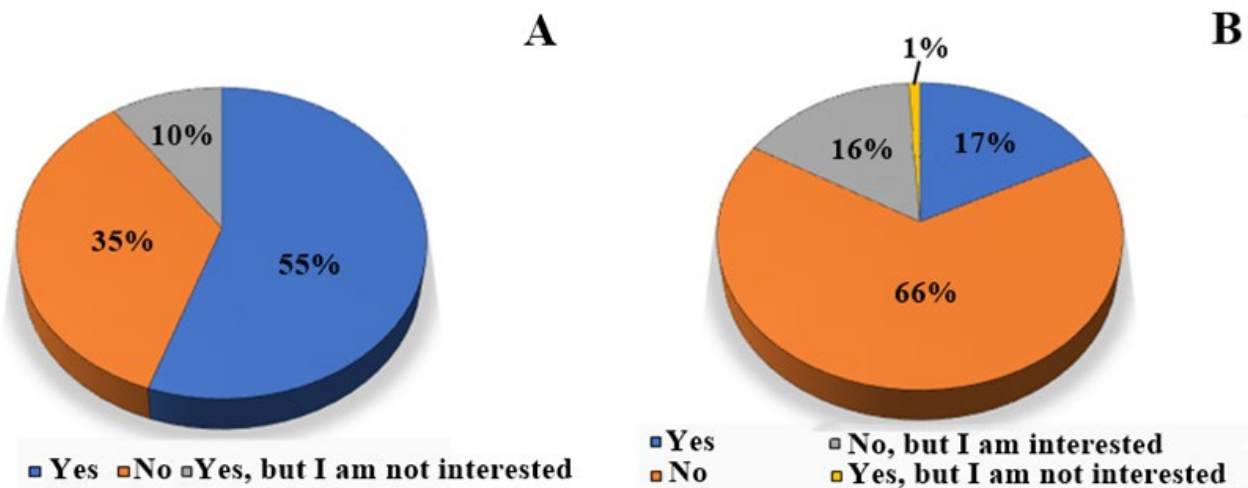
According to several authors, the relationship between guardians and their animals is also

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an important factor in the purchasing behavior and selection of foods, due to the increasing pet anthropomorphism (CHEN et al., 2012; KIENZLE et al., 1998; AYLESWORTH et al., 1999).

An important example of the humanization of pets is the inclusion of natural foods in the diet of these animals (Figures 4A and 4B). In this context, we questioned the guardians about natural diet for pets and obtained the following answers: 55% of the guardians know about natural pet food; 35% have never heard of it; 10% are aware of this type of food, but are not interested in learning more about it (Figure 4A).

Figure 4 - Proportions of responses to questionnaires on natural food, knowledge about natural food (A) and use of animal food (B).



When we consider the percentage of guardians who fed their pets natural food (17%) and those interested in including this type of food in the diet of their animals (16%), it is possible to observe a significant growth expectation for this type of animal nutrition (Figure 4B). Nevertheless, 66% of the pet guardians of Teresina have never used natural food to feed their pets.

This result is probably associated with social changes and the search for healthier food. However, as mentioned by Schleicher et al (SCHLEICHER et al., 2019) dog guardians who are more serious about purchasing healthy food for themselves are also more likely to be serious about purchasing healthy food for their dogs.

The aforementioned authors also mentioned that guardians who are price sensitive and loyal to specific food brands are also more likely to be price sensitive and loyal to some specific pet food brands.

Nevertheless, in the current socioeconomic condition of Brazilians in the pandemic scenario the search for more affordable pet foods in the market is of greater relevance for

guardians, since most of them earn low wages that are only enough to cover their basic living expenses.

Companion animals have gained ample space in the emotional life of guardians and the search for high-quality pet food has been highlighted. However, the cost for keeping an animal healthy and in good conditions is still high for Brazilian citizens.

The minority of guardians who answered our questionnaire care about the protein levels in the pet food. This is a problem, because food with deficiency in any ingredient can represent an imminent risk to the health of an animal. In addition, our findings demonstrated that guardians have doubts about the number of times the pets should be fed during the day according to the type of food offered.

Because this research was focused on animal guardians, it was possible to deduce from our findings that a large part of the population is aware of the existence of natural food and consider this a beneficial option for health and quality of life of pets.

It was also possible to observe the proportion of respondents who have never heard about natural pet food, but have full interest on it. In this context, natural food should be presented through initiatives of zoonotic disease education, so that more people learn about alternatives different from the popular industrial dry pet food. The natural diet is a healthy and dynamic alternative that can be included in the budget of pet guardians, complying with the health requirements of each animal.

4 Final considerations

In conclusion, our findings showed that the socioeconomic profile of guardians of dogs and cats in Teresina is characterized by young middle-class women without children, who are aware of the importance of food palatability and acceptability by pets. Most of those guardians seek affordable products aimed at the maintenance of well-being and health of their animals. In addition, our results indicated that pet shops are the favorite places to buy food for companion animals and the natural pet food segment has great potential for expansion.

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